

# Going Down with the Ship

By Eric Douglas

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*Cayman Cowboys*

## Chapter 1

The conch made its way slowly across the sand – journeying from one reef outcropping to the next. The separation was no more than 20 feet, but it had probably taken the poor creature hours to make it the 15 feet it had traveled so far. Tiny marks – footprints, really – in the white sand showed his progress and the determination it had taken.

The reef itself was spectacular and the warm water was perfectly clear. The divers could see more than 80 feet in any direction as they hovered weightless five feet above the sand and reef bottom and 40 feet from the surface. The reef was alive with fish life and color. The coral itself looked healthy on this particular spot, something Jackson Pauley was glad to see. Not all of the dive sites on the United States' only living coral reef were in as good of shape – storm water runoff with pollutants and fertilizer drainage from farms had seen to that.

The conch still had five feet to go. It would no doubt take it another several hours to make it to the relative safety of the reef structure. What had caused it to decide to move from one to the other was anybody's guess. A predator itself, the conch was probably looking for fresh prey, but it was taking a risk crossing the open sand. Fortunately, for the conch, its large and ornately-decorated shell provided some degree of protection against larger predators, but not from the most dangerous creature in the ocean. It had nothing to protect it from that.

Jackson was leading a group of divers from the Midwest along the reef. Some of them were pretty good in the water. He could tell they took their diving seriously and were conscious of their motion and breathing. A couple of the divers in the group weren't really paying attention, however. Jackson saw them brush against the reef and one had actually sat down on a brain coral as he adjusted his fin. Sometimes there was no getting through to people.

A diver spotted the slow moving conch and descended to the sand to get a closer look. At first, she kept a respectful distance. Then she moved closer. The little mollusk didn't stand a chance. It attempted to retreat inside its shell, but the diver picked it up to look. Jackson guessed she wanted to see where it had gone. Not seeing anything, the diver simply dropped the shell back on the sand. It landed upside down. She swam away.

Nature and natural selection would probably have allowed the critter to survive, although it would have taken a while for the animal to work its way out of the shell and turn everything right side up again. In that time, it could have fall prey to just about anything with teeth under the water.

As soon as the divers moved on, Jackson swam over and righted the animal. He also moved it a couple feet closer to its original objective. *For your trouble*, he thought as he followed along with the divers.

Back on the boat, Jackson checked everyone in to make sure the entire group had made it back onboard. This was the second dive of the day on a two-tank trip and that was it. Once all the divers were accounted for, the boat crew would head the boat back to the dock – just in time to turn it around and do it again. On good days, they could offer two trips a day and a third trip for a night dive, a couple times a week.

Such was the life of a divemaster in the Florida Keys. Jackson was actually a dive instructor, but he spent most of his time working with vacationing divers, leading dives and making sure everyone enjoyed their dive experience. Many novice divers and non-divers confuse the role of a divemaster compared to that of the instructor, believing divemasters to be superior. Divemasters are the first level of dive professional, serving as dive leaders and tasked with the safety of divers in their care. They cannot, however, teach people to dive. And that was why Jackson thought of himself as a divemaster, rather than an instructor. He rarely got the opportunity to teach. It wasn't all that bad, he reasoned, very few people he knew had an office with this nice of a view.

Jackson signaled the boat captain that everyone was on board and a deckhand raised the anchor. The captain turned the boat toward the beach and began bringing the engines up to cruising speed. The divers were busy packing away their gear and gathering up their belongings. They were all excitedly talking about the things they had seen on the dive, including several large barracuda that hovered calmly above the reef waiting for lunch to swim by. *None of them even remember the conch*, Jackson thought. He was a bit of sucker for underdogs. The big guys could take care of themselves.

Jackson moved forward in the boat, just behind the captain, to talk for a minute. As the captain turned the boat slightly to port, he crossed a wave awkwardly. It caused the boat to lurch down and then up sharply. One of the passengers, the woman who had picked up the conch earlier, lost her balance.

While there were rails around the boat, and the ropes were in place, she was just in the one, unlucky spot that would allow her to slip, bounce and then fall overboard. She was in the water before anyone knew what had happened. Jackson saw the entire scene in slow motion. He saw her crumple as she hit the water. The boat was going better than 20 knots. There was no way she was conscious.

Without hesitation, Jackson took three long strides, moving toward the stern. His next step was onto the seat the divers used. From there he launched himself into the air. The boat kept moving forward and by the time he hit the water, it was 10 feet away. He dove directly through the wake kicked up by the boat's twin propellers.

Jackson was still wearing his wetsuit so he had extra buoyancy. He surfaced from the dive to get his bearings and then dove down, piking his body to get below the surface quickly. In the back of his mind, Jackson was aware the captain cut the engines back and was beginning to circle around.

If he didn't get to the woman quickly, she would drown. He knew she was unconscious, and she was sinking. Jackson dived again, the lift his wetsuit provided working against him at the

moment. He had to struggle to get down. In his reaction to rescue the woman, he had jumped into the water without his fins or mask. If he didn't find her quickly, he knew she would be out of reach, visually and physically. There would be no way he could dive down more than 15 or 20 feet without the proper equipment.

As he turned to bolt back toward the surface, Jackson saw her. She was drifting underwater – her face toward the surface. He couldn't see clearly through the water, but she didn't appear to be moving. He broke the surface, rising up as high as he could, inhaling deeply and then immediately turning to swim back down.

He pulled and fought his way through the water. His lungs were beginning to burn from the exertion. He hadn't spent enough time on the surface to clear the carbon dioxide that was building up in his body. Jackson didn't know how much strength he was going to have left when he got to her. He could see the dark outline of her body sinking deeper. She definitely wasn't moving. Jackson's head began to swim from the exertion. He might just black out, although there wasn't anything he could do about it at this point. He did his best to focus and concentrate.

It wasn't the first time Jackson had been in a situation like this. He had been a firefighter in New York City on September 11. He had pushed himself beyond what he thought were his limits on that day – like everyone he knew. He knew fear. He knew confusion and frustration at not being able to help those who needed it. He also knew how to dig deep, deeper than he ever realized he could.

Pulling and kicking, he finally made it to the woman. As quickly as he could, he grabbed the woman, wrapping an arm around her chest and below both of her arms. He began to swim for the surface. Now the buoyancy of the wetsuit worked in his favor, but it wouldn't be enough on its own. He had to kick. He pulled with his one free hand. And he held on with the other. He had to make it to the surface.

The feeling of the air and sun hitting his face as he broke the surface was the most welcome feeling he had had in a long time. The boat was only 20 feet away. The captain and the other passengers had been able to track his progress from above and were following along.

Within seconds, one of the passengers tossed out a life ring. Jackson grabbed hold and they all worked together to pull him and the unconscious woman to the boat. The passengers on the boat pulled so hard on the rope to get them on board, Jackson and his unconscious companion dipped below the surface and Jackson swallowed a mouthful of water. He almost lost his grip, but was able to hold on. The woman was a dead weight behind him, pulling him under.

As they reached the boat, hands stretched out and pulled the woman onboard. They immediately began providing care. Jackson climbed up on the swim step at the stern of the boat and rested for a second.

"She isn't breathing. What do we do?" one of the divers called out.

"Remember your training. Open the airway. Give her a chance," Jackson croaked back as he tried to stand. "And someone get the DAN oxygen unit."

One of the other divers stepped in and gently moved the woman's head back and lifted her chin forward.

"She still isn't breathing," the second rescuer said after 10 seconds.

"Use the mask. Give her two rescue breaths," Jackson instructed as he caught his breath and moved forward in the boat. He was trained as a medic in his past life and had worked these situations before as well.

The rescuer put the mask in place and caused the woman's chest to rise each time he exhaled. Jackson dropped to his knees beside the woman. As he did, he glanced up at the boat captain and

signaled for him to call for help and get the boat moving again. Jackson felt strong enough to help.

The first rescuer felt for a pulse at the woman's neck. He could feel her heart beating, but she still wasn't breathing on her own. Jackson was still trying to catch his own breath, so he didn't have enough strength yet to breathe for the woman. He told the diver to continue delivering rescue breaths to the woman.

Breathe. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

While the rescuer breathed for the unconscious woman, Jackson turned on the oxygen unit and connected the hose to the mask. She needed oxygen and she needed it as quickly as possible. By adding oxygen to the rescue breaths, they were giving her as much oxygen as they could at the moment.

Breathe. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe. The woman began to choke and cough. Jackson reached across her body and rolled her onto her side as quickly as he could. He opened her mouth to help clear out the vomit.

They laid her back down and checked for breathing sounds again. She started breathing on her own.

The boat continued to bounce back toward the beach, moving as quickly as the captain was able to push it, but the divers on board never noticed. They had collectively held their breath and prayed. Now they began to relax.

Within minutes, the boat pulled into the harbor and an ambulance crew was waiting at the dock. A crowd had started to gather – it included a local TV crew.

Jackson helped the medics get the woman sorted out. She was breathing normally now, and had started to regain consciousness. The medics switched her from the boat's O2 unit to their own and loaded her onto a gurney to take her to the hospital. Jackson began to feel the inevitable let down as the emergency was over and his body stopped forcing adrenaline into his system. He suddenly felt very tired. His wiry 5'11" frame suddenly felt more like he was carrying 300 pounds, rather than the 175 he truly was.

"Jackson, Jackson," the reporter from the TV crew called. "Can we get a comment from you? The divers on the boat said you saved this woman's life. You're a hero."

"Look," Jackson replied, as he pushed his hand through the sand-colored curls on top of his head. "I don't want any credit. I don't want any publicity. I just want to be left alone." With that, Jackson jumped back on board the boat as the captain fired the boat's engines up to move it back to the boat's normal slip.

"What's that all about?" the captain asked Jackson. "You could've had your 15 minutes there. Would've been good for a drink or two at the bar tonight."

Jackson stood quietly looking out over the water for a minute. The captain thought he hadn't heard him and started to repeat the question.

"I was in New York when the world changed. I know guys who ran into those buildings trying to help people. A bunch of them never came back. Those guys are heroes," Jackson said quietly, with a far away look in his eyes. He was imagining a scene he would never forget. "After what we all saw, some of the guys turned to drinking or whatever. I just decided to get away. I want to guide divers and be left alone. The last thing I am is a hero."

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“Hello. I’m looking for some information about a company doing business in town,” Andrea Perez said as she walked up to the counter in the city hall building. “It’s the company doing the work on the ship they’re going to sink off shore – Seashore Engineering.”

“What are you looking for, dear?” the middle-aged clerk asked of the petite, dark-skinned Latina.

“Well, whatever you’ve got, I guess. I can’t seem to find any information about them online. I’m looking for names of parent companies or officers. I’d like to know who put up the bond for the work they are doing. Can I just see their corporate papers? I’ll know what I’m looking for when I find it.”

“So, why are you looking for all this information, sweetheart?” the woman asked as she opened a file drawer and began looking.

“I’m with an environmental group out of Ft. Lauderdale, Protect the Reefs, and there are some rumors this company is actually a different organization that’s under investigation for environmental violations in several different states and a couple countries.”

“Now, just hold on a minute here,” Glenn Downing said as he interrupted the conversation. Downing was the local organizer of the artificial reef project. Considering the money and attention he was bringing to the local community, and the amount of money the local area made off scuba diving, the city government gave him office space in city hall to work on the project. “Hold on a minute. I don’t think this young lady has the right to see what’s in those documents, Mrs. Charles.”

“I’m sorry. Just who are you?” Andrea stammered, momentarily taken aback.

“I’m Glenn Downing. I’m putting this whole project together. I’ve raised all the money from private donors and the state, and I’m the one who is going to provide this enormous attraction for the local diving community. It’ll bring millions into the local economy,” Downing said, as he slipped into his standard speech about the benefits of the project.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Downing. I believe those are public documents, just like every other contract with the city and the local citizenry has the right to look them over,” Andrea responded. She had been through similar situations before and now that she knew who she was talking to, she could handle the situation – she thought.

“You might be right, of course, but since you aren’t a citizen of this town, or county for that matter, I don’t think that applies to you. I think you’ll have to ask the city council to see that information. Mrs. Charles here just can’t give it to anyone,” Downing stonewalled. “Besides, this is an extremely reputable company. They provided us with the best references. There is nothing to suspect from them.”

“Are you kidding me?” Andrea retorted, her temper quickly getting the better of her. “What are you trying to hide, Mr. Downing?”

“I think that’s enough,” Downing said imperiously. “As I said, you’ll have to ask the city council for permission to see those records. They meet once a month, on the first Tuesday. They met last night so you’ll have to come back next month.”

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Downing was on his way out of the office when he had intercepted Andrea looking for information. As it turned out, he was on his way to meet with the owners of the very company she was looking to investigate. If she had known that, she could have followed him, although

they weren't exactly working in secret. You couldn't work in secret on a ship that large, in the middle of a small town.

The ship they were preparing as an artificial reef was the *USS Beauregard*, a Sumner-class Destroyer, commissioned at the end of World War II that served the US Navy through the early-90s. It had been mothballed for years. The proper pressure applied by the right US Senator had saved it from being turned into razor blades. Now it was going to be an exciting new attraction for divers visiting Withrow Key.

Withrow Key was a small, rundown town, halfway between Key Largo and Key West. At one point, before the major highway opened up and drivers could make it to Key West in a few hours, it had been a major spot along the route. Trains would stop there and passengers would hop off to stretch their legs and have dinner and drinks. More than one celebrity had spent time in Withrow Key.

Now, however, most drivers barely noticed the withering community. It was just one more wide spot in the road to stop and get a cold drink on the way to somewhere more popular. Buildings were weathered and tired, but still solid. The locals still had pride in the town, but there wasn't a lot of money to go around. They didn't waste it on pretty signs and decorations.

It just so happened Withrow Key had its own deepwater dock. Passing Navy ships would stop in and take on cargo, or give the crew a rest back in the 1940s and 50s. Because of this, they were able to prepare the *Beauregard* to become an artificial reef locally instead of having the preparation work done in Miami before towing the boat into position. This served to pump hundreds of thousands of dollars into the local economy as the crew doing the work stayed in local hotels and ate their meals in local diners. Beyond that, though, the local politicians and organizers hoped this new attraction would bring divers to Withrow Key and revitalize the economy. A lot was riding on having the *USS Beauregard* underwater and available to divers.

To prepare a ship to be a dive site and artificial reef, the ship had to have holes cut through its hull. Divers often want to penetrate wrecks – that is, they want to swim inside. In a natural shipwreck, whatever that was (there isn't much natural about a ship on the bottom of the ocean), divers enter through portholes and doorways. This can be dangerous, however, as it's easy to get turned around and lost inside. No local government wants to build an attraction for divers that ends up killing them. So when ships are designated as artificial reefs, they are prepared to allow for easier access.

But even more important than work done for access, at least to Andrea, was the environmental work. Workers must thoroughly clean ships of contaminants. They have to remove diesel fuel, oils and other chemicals that are commonly on board a warship. Again, in contrast to a true shipwreck where no one chooses what ends up on the reef, no government wants to create a dive destination that ends up killing the reef itself.

The larger the artificial reef, the more work has to be done, cutting holes, cleaning contaminants and preparing the ship. There are artificial reefs all over the world. All of them provide vital fish habitats and structure for coral animals and other marine organisms to call home. But most importantly for the people of Withrow Key, it would be an exciting place for divers to dive.

“Good afternoon,” Downing said as he stepped out of the bright Florida sun into the relative shade of the Seashore Engineering work trailer, positioned on the dock beside the massive ship. The company doing the preparation work on the *USS Beauregard* wasn't spending a lot of money on trappings. They were doing this job as simply as they could. “I have an appointment to see Mr. Parker.”

“Hello, Mr. Downing. Go right in. They’re expecting you,” the receptionist replied.

“Hello gentlemen,” Downing said as he walked through the door and waved to the men in the room, before he turned to address the man in charge. “Hello, Mr. Parker.”

“Mr. Downing, come on in. Have a seat. Wow, is it hot outside or what?” Parker said making small talk as he pointed to a chair in front of his desk. The other men, Parker’s assistants and key team leaders, rocked back in chairs against the far wall. “Before we get started on our weekly progress report, I just want to tell you how impressed we all are,” Parker continued.

He swept his hand toward the three men in the room, and they all nodded their heads. “You’ve done a tremendous job organizing community support, getting the dive operations involved and keeping the city people excited as well. This is as good a project as I’ve seen anywhere.”

“Thanks, Mr. Parker, I appreciate that. I’ve been thinking, actually, about hiring myself out after this all said and done to communities interested in bringing in an artificial reef of their own. This program has run so smoothly, I think other people could benefit from my expertise,” Downing said, gushing at the high praise. “You know, I really believe projects like this are important for the economy and the environment at the same time.”

“It’s a rare individual like you that understands that. And it’s great to see someone as bright and enthusiastic as yourself who sees how the needs of the environment and the economy can work hand-in-hand,” Parker said. “As for the project, I want you to know that everything is going just fine. We’re right on schedule and things are going smoothly. Nothing special to report, as a matter-of-fact.”

“That’s great to hear, Mr. Parker. That’s why I’m so pleased with your company. I just love to work with professionals like you,” Downing said.

“We’d be happy to take you on an inspection tour of our progress. The ship is pretty big, but we can probably cover all the important areas in about three hours or so. Of course, there isn’t any air conditioning inside the ship so it’ll probably be pretty hot,” Parker volunteered.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary at all. You gentlemen are the experts at this. I’m just a diver and a community organizer. I’ll leave it up to you to do your job. Besides, I have several other meetings today with the mayor and key business people in town. We’re making final arrangements for the ceremony to sink her. I just won’t have time to do the inspection tour today,” Downing explained. He really didn’t want to get hot and sweaty on a day like today. He needed to make some more plans. If this all worked out the way he expected it would, he was planning on taking his success on the road. He imagined other towns around the country would pay him very well to duplicate his accomplishments.

“Sure, I understand,” Parker said. “A busy man like you can’t worry about the details. You hire people you trust to do a job and let them do it. That’s the mark of a great administrator.”

“Thank you, Mr. Parker. I pride myself in being a good manager and being in control of the big picture,” Downing preened as he stood to leave. He didn’t realize it, but he was actually the one being dismissed. “And that’s just what I was telling that young environmentalist girl who was snooping around today at city hall. You men are the experts and you know exactly what you’re doing. Listen, I think I’ll be going now. If you gentlemen need me for anything, just let me know, but I’ll leave you to your jobs.”

“It was good to see you again, Mr. Downing,” Parker replied as he showed him to the door of the office. “We’ll be ready in three days for the final sinking. Everything will be perfect. Don’t you worry.”

“I appreciate that, Mr. Parker,” Downing said as he left.

Back inside the office, Parker closed the door behind him, raised his hand to signal “Wait” and walked to the window. He watched Downing walk to his car, get in and close the door before he said anything.

He lowered his hand and chuckled to himself.

“Is he always like that?” one of the men in the room asked.

“You mean an idiot?” Parker asked, laughing fully. “Yeah, pretty much. He doesn’t have a clue who we are or what’s going on. He’s never been on the ship, other than just to glance around the upper deck. It’s simple really. You flatter him a little bit, blow a little smoke up his skirt and he goes away. It is much easier than bribing him.”

“And what he doesn’t know, or isn’t smart enough to ask, won’t hurt him” one of the other men continued.

“You got it. We clean it up, carrying barrels on board to remove contaminants, except some of them go on already full. And they don’t seem to make it off. No one will ever know where it comes from,” Parker continued. “It was a stroke of genius to take the waste from the chrome plating factory in Miami and get rid of it this way. We make tons of extra money charging to dispose of the chemicals up there and then this genius pays us to get rid of it down here. Glad I thought of it all.”

“And if it kills a few fish in the process, well that’s just too bad.”

“Not my problem. We’ll be finished up and out of here by then. The company will be dissolved and we’ll be doing this again somewhere else. Or maybe I’ll retire this time to my home in Costa Rica,” Parker laughed.

“What about the environmentalist he mentioned?”

“Check around and see if you can find out who it is. If you can, encourage the girl that it’s time to leave town,” Parker said.